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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Spy Wars

There is much that is unclear—and doubtless will remain unclear—in the spy wars now taking place so visibly in Western Europe. That's the nature of intelligence matters. But it is not so difficult to make some rough judgments. One is that while over the last decade the press was enthralled itself and its readers with tales of a "rogue elephant" CIA, the real rogue elephant—the KGB—was having a field day.

Our own intelligence capacities have been virtually emasculated by controversy and ideological assaults—in particular our all-important counterintelligence services. But the KGB and its East bloc helpmates have been steadily expanding and growing ever-bolder. Under cover of detente, they ballooned their trade missions; there are 700 Soviet "diplomats" in France, three times the number in 1970, and 2,400 other Soviet personnel. Informed observers believe nearly half of all Soviet diplomatic and other official personnel in the West are intelligence agents. By contrast there are only 36 French diplomats in the Soviet Union.

The French expulsion of 47 Soviets on spying charges earlier this week was in part a wholesale response to this wholesale onslaught. Soviet intelligence activities have become so pervasive that it's difficult to deal with them any other way.

And while the CIA was under attack for its limited efforts to shore up our friends around the world, the KGB was working overtime to exploit our open societies. We now have quite substantial evidence, for example, of the KGB/Bulgarian plot to kill the pope. This is appalling enough for

what it tells us about the nature of our foes. But equally appalling has been what the investigations into that plot have uncovered about the extent of East bloc efforts to destabilize the West.

The pope plot was hatched in a nightmarish milieu of gunrunning, drug-smuggling and extensive covert and overt penetration of Western institutions by enemy agents and their willing and unwitting collaborators. The pattern was brilliantly spelled out even before the attempt on the pope in author Claire Sterling's book, "The Terror Network." Operating both directly and through front groups, many of them based in Paris, the KGB and its allies have fostered a large part of the terrorism that has plagued Italy, Turkey and other West European countries in the last decade. It was also Mrs. Sterling who subsequently unveiled the Bulgarian connection in the pope plot.

Mrs. Sterling and others who have been trying to alert the West to the dimensions of the problem haven't been popular in many quarters. They have been pooh-poohed as hysterical Red-baiters. Mrs. Sterling was sued in Paris by leftists who disputed some of her "Terror Network" conclusions; she lost a technical point, which received much attention in the press, but won on the main issues, which didn't. Incredibly, she has even been pressured by our own CIA in Rome to drop her investigations into the Bulgarian connection, a local CIA enterprise well worth investigating.

France isn't the only country that has been giving the boot to Soviet spies recently. Italy, Spain, Britain, West Germany and others have expelled groups of so-called Soviet diplomats, trade representatives and journalists recently, most often for trying to steal high-tech military secrets. FBI Director William Webster has called the Soviet efforts "the most sophisticated espionage assault" in history.

Just why the French gave the sack to 47 Soviets this week may never be known. Official sources have hinted that it was because of industrial espionage activities. There may be even uglier reasons. A high-level French counterespionage agent was found executed on a mountain road in southern France waiting for a contact; he had been working on East bloc penetration of Italy and the Bulgarian connection in the murder plot on Pope John Paul. He was found dead within hours of the ouster of two Soviet airline officials from Rome for spying, and only a week after the New York Times disclosed that a Bulgarian defector in Paris had confirmed KGB complicity in the pope plot.

(The Bulgarian was said by the Times to have defected in July 1981 after the pope was shot; now there are rumors that he may have defected before the assassination attempt and sought to warn the French and Italians to the danger. What did France and its security services know and when did they know it? What is there still to come out?)

Whatever the case, the events of recent weeks have underlined the need to continue rebuilding our own intelligence capabilities. Democracies are never at ease with the underground world of the spy. Intelligence activities can get out of control and threaten individual liberties. But the overreaction of the last decade badly needs correcting. It's clear that the spy wars are real and that for some time the West has been losing.